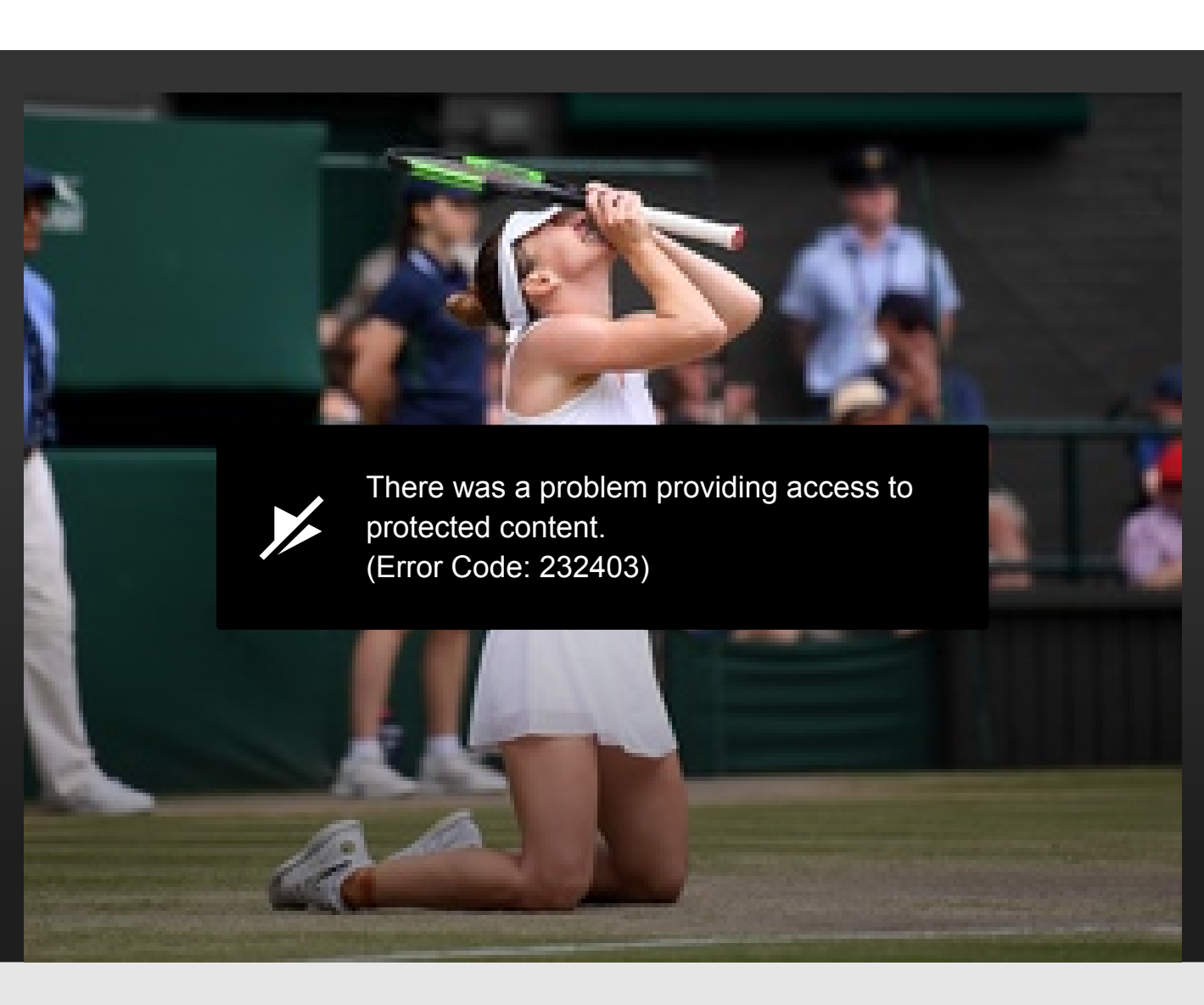
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After Simona Halep's Wimbledon rout of Serena, her best may yet come

AFTER SIMONA HALEP'S WIMBLEDON ROUT OF SERENA, HER BEST MAY YET COME

The 27-year-old stunned the 23-time Grand Slam champion, 6-2, 6-2, on Centre Court.

By **Steve Flink**

July 13, 2019

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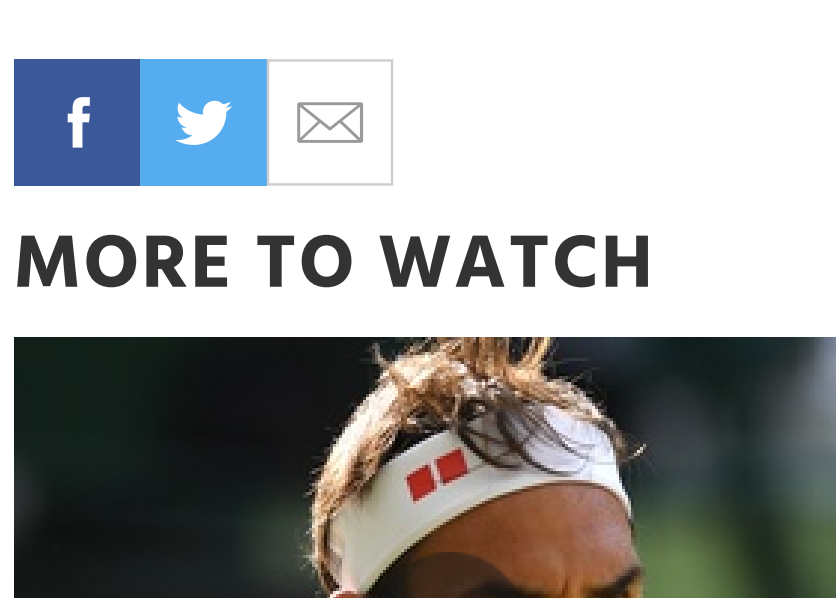


Match point: Federer clinches Wimbledon semifinal over Nadal

Preview: Sweet 16 for Djokovic or will Federer extend major title gap?

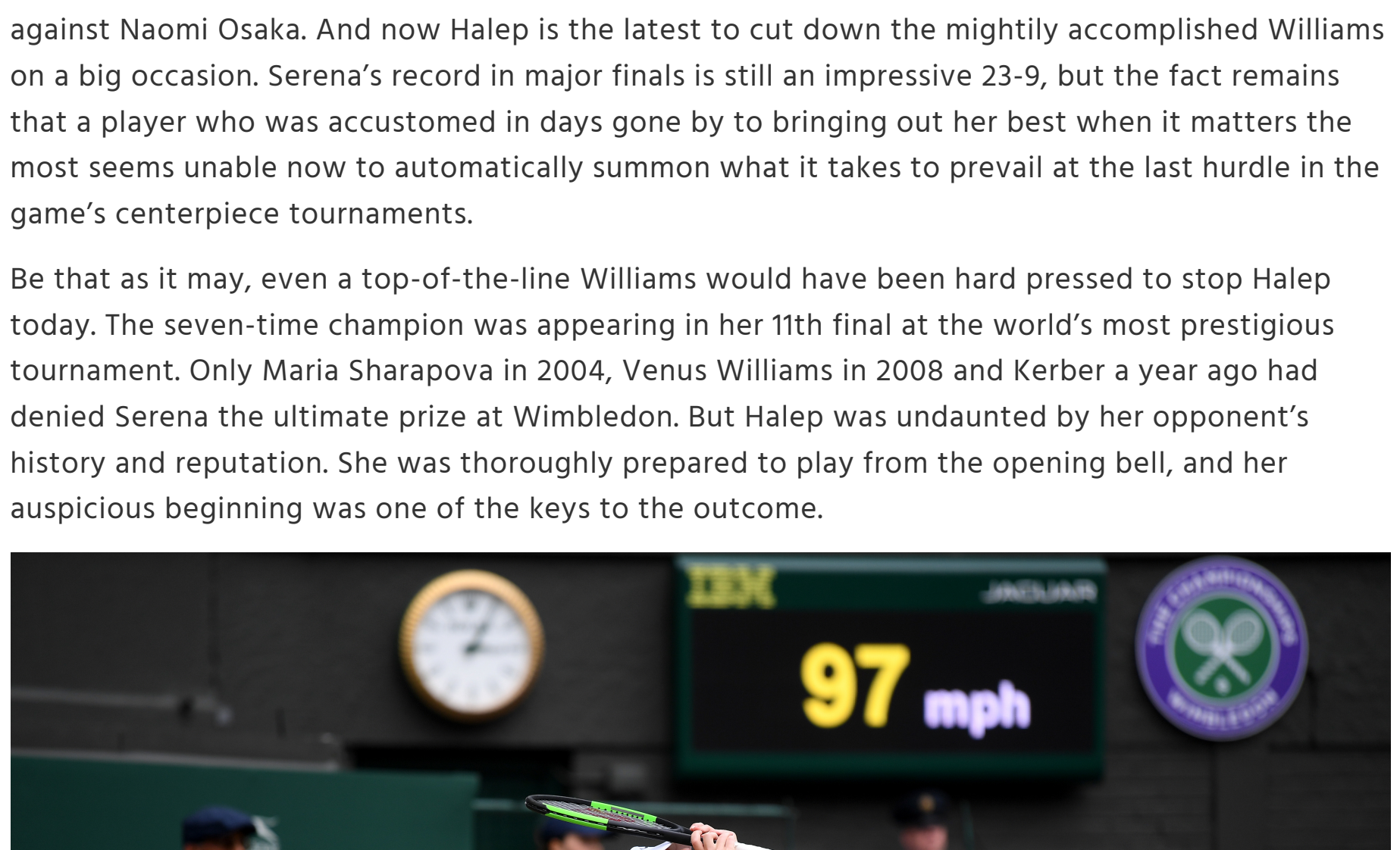
Sadie Bristow had Wimbledon dreams, but after one day that all changed

LONDON—Stepping out onto the fabled Centre Court for her first Wimbledon final, Simona Halep could have been forgiven if she had been somewhat intimidated by the size of the occasion, and the fame and reputation of her opponent. Halep had faced Serena Williams ten times previously, and only once had she recorded a win. Moreover, the iconic American was chasing another historical milestone, a 24th Grand Slam singles title, which would tie the record set by Margaret Court back in the sixties and seventies.

Not many in the cognoscenti were giving Halep much of a chance. But the 27-year-old proceeded to play the best match of her career to claim a second major title, upending Serena masterfully, 6-2, 6-2, with a mere three unforced errors across two immaculate sets. Williams made 26 unprovoked mistakes. Halep broke Serena four times, did not lose her own serve, covered the court with astonishing alacrity, and came away with the crown in 56 minutes against an adversary who never quite knew what hit her.

Halep's performance was almost out of this world, and this was Serena's third consecutive defeat in the final of a Grand Slam event. A year ago, she lost the final, 6-3, 6-3, against the German southpaw Angelique Kerber. Later in the summer, she bowed out in the US Open final, 6-2, 6-4, against Naomi Osaka. And now Halep is the latest to cut down the mightily accomplished Williams on a big occasion. Serena's record in major finals is still an impressive 23-9, but the fact remains that a player who was accustomed in days gone by to bringing out her best when it matters the most seems unable now to automatically summon what it takes to prevail at the last hurdle in the game's centerpiece tournaments.

Be that as it may, even a top-of-the-line Williams would have been hard pressed to stop Halep today. The seven-time champion was appearing in her 11th final at the world's most prestigious tournament. Only Maria Sharapova in 2004, Venus Williams in 2008 and Kerber a year ago had denied Serena the ultimate prize at Wimbledon. But Halep was undaunted by her opponent's history and reputation. She was thoroughly prepared to play from the opening bell, and her auspicious beginning was one of the keys to the outcome.



Although Serena connected with five out of six first serves in the opening game, it was not enough for her to hold. Williams led 30-15, but she overcooked a crosscourt backhand with Halep on the run. At 30-30, Halep challenged Williams backhand to backhand, and Serena blinked. And then Williams fielded a solid return from Halep and sent an inside out forehand wide. Halep had the immediate break at 30 for 1-0.

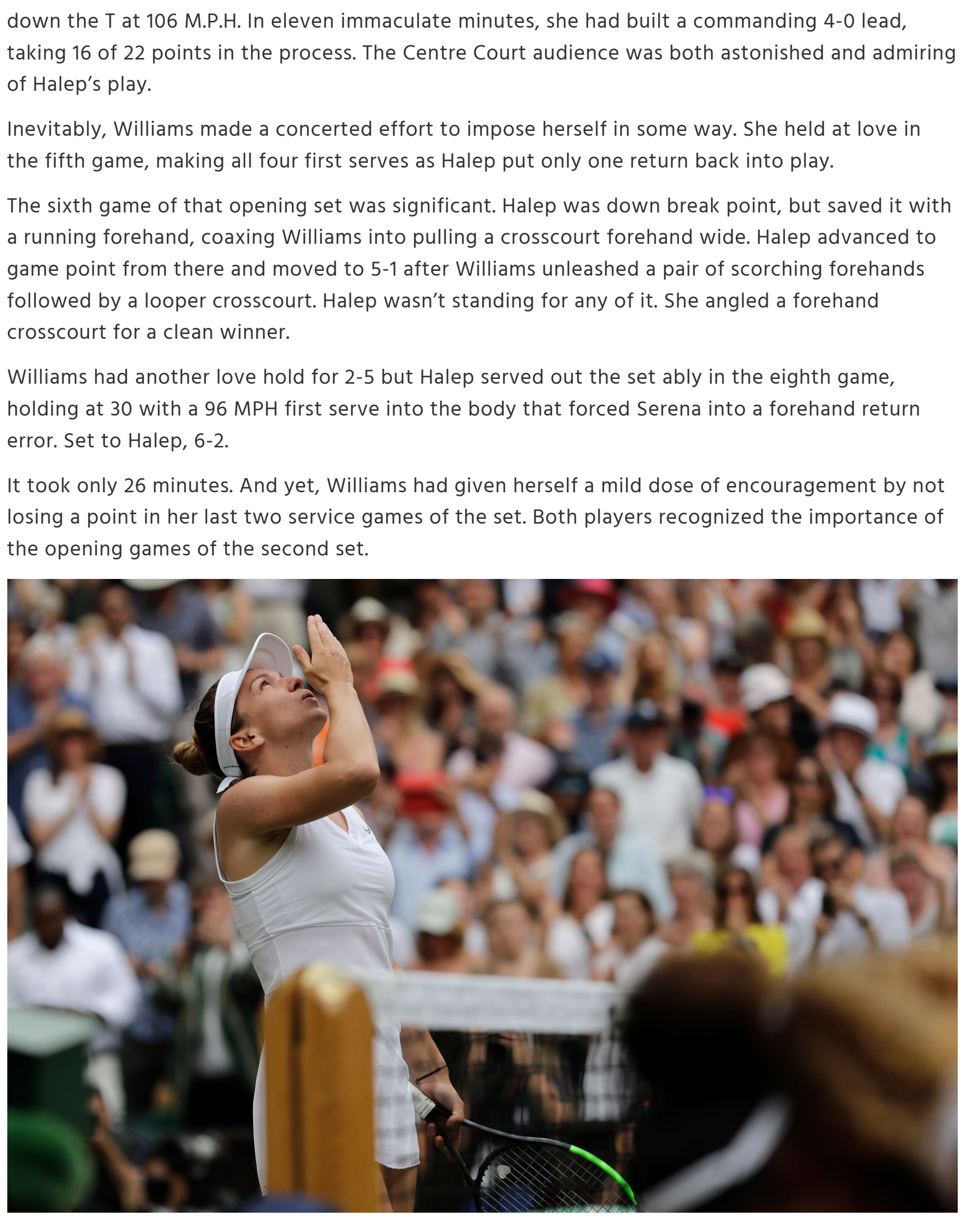
It soon became 3-0, two breaks up. Then, serving at 40-30 in the fourth game, she released an ace down the T at 106 M.P.H. In eleven immaculate minutes, she had built a commanding 4-0 lead, taking 16 of 22 points in the process. The Centre Court audience was both astonished and admiring of Halep's play.

Inevitably, Williams made a concerted effort to impose herself in some way. She held at love in the fifth game, making all four first serves as Halep put only one return back into play.

The sixth game of that opening set was significant. Halep was down break point, but saved it with a running forehand, coaxing Williams into pulling a crosscourt forehand wide. Halep advanced to game point from there and moved to 5-1 after Williams unleashed a pair of scorching forehands followed by a looper crosscourt. Halep wasn't standing for any of it. She angled a forehand crosscourt for a clean winner.

Williams had another love hold for 2-5 but Halep served out the set ably in the eighth game, holding at 30 with a 96 MPH first serve into the body that forced Serena into a forehand return error. Set to Halep, 6-2.

It took only 26 minutes. And yet, Williams had given herself a mild dose of encouragement by not losing a point in her last two service games of the set. Both players recognized the importance of the opening games of the second set.



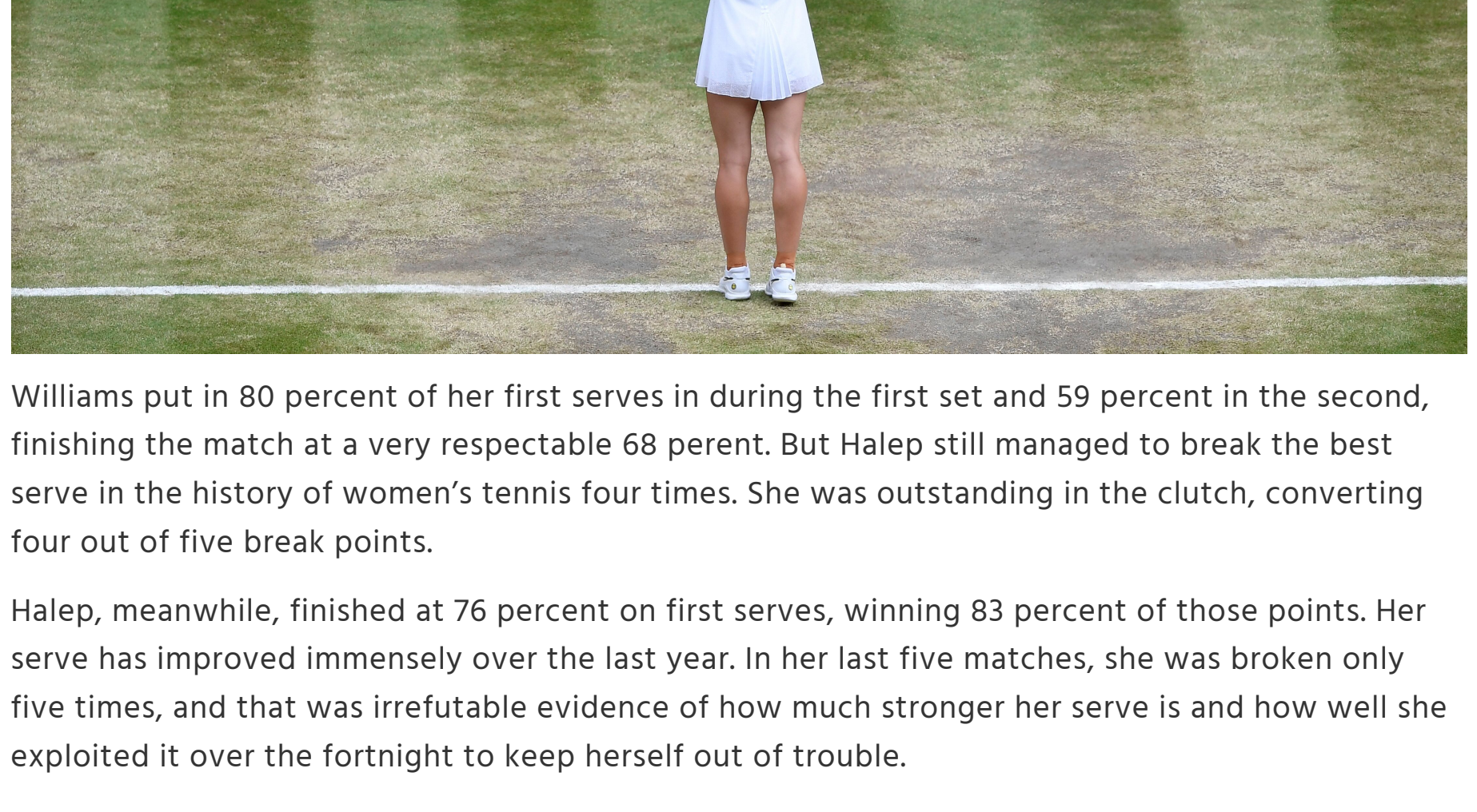
Serena held at 30 in the first game, imploring herself along the way with one of her patented screams. Halep could surely sense now how much Williams wanted to swing the battle in her direction. The No. 7 seed was down 15-30 in the second game, but swept three points in a row with cool authority, starting with a beautifully struck two-hander up the line that Serena could not handle on the run. Unshaken, Williams held at love for 2-1, buoyed by two un-returnable second serves and a pair of outright winners.

At that stage, the prevailing view was that Williams was going to will her way into the match. She had held four consecutive times and was applying some pressure in Halep's service games. Halep was acutely aware of Serena's presence at this stage and knew full well that thwarting the American now would take a concerted effort.

That is exactly what Halep put forth. She held at love for 2-2 without missing a first serve. Now Halep was moving again to another level. With Serena serving at 2-3, Halep went to 15-40 with a spectacular forehand passing shot winner set up by a backhand down-the-line pass. On the following point, Williams angled a backhand crosscourt with interest, and Halep scampered across the baseline to reach it. She sliced her backhand short crosscourt and Serena awkwardly missed her two-hander long as she went down the line from close range. Halep had the break for 3-2, and swiftly consolidated it in the following game.

Down a set and serving at 2-4, Williams understood her plight. She came from 0-30 to 40-30 in the critical seventh game, only to net a backhand crosscourt needlessly. Halep fashioned a break point, but Serena erased it with an ace down the T. Serena garnered a second game point, but an errant backhand was costly. Halep, however, was unrelenting. She gave herself a second break point opportunity, and this one she took with assurance. A deep two-hander crosscourt gave Halep just the opening she needed to drive a backhand down the line into a vacant corner for a winner.

And so Halep was precisely where she wanted to be, up a set and two breaks in the Wimbledon final against the heavily favorite, serving for the match at 5-2 in the second set. Not for an instant did she reveal any sign of nerves. A couple of errors from Serena allowed Halep to establish a 30-0 lead. Then she released another telling 107 M.P.H first serve down the T for triple match point, and she held at love when Williams erred again off the forehand.



Williams put in 80 percent of her first serves in during the first set and 59 percent in the second, finishing the match at a very respectable 68 perent. But Halep still managed to break the best serve in the history of women's tennis four times. She was outstanding in the clutch, converting four out of five break points.

Halep, meanwhile, finished at 76 percent on first serves, winning 83 percent of those points. Her serve has improved immensely over the last year. In her last five matches, she was broken only five times, and that was irrefutable evidence of how much stronger her serve is and how well she exploited it over the fortnight to keep herself out of trouble.

"I have always been intimidated a little bit when I faced Serena," said Halep, though you wouldn't have known it today. "She's an inspiration for everyone and the model for everyone. Today I decided before the match to focus on myself and on the final of a Grand Slam, not on her. That's why I was able to play my best to be relaxed and to be able to be positive and confident against her.

"At a set and 5-2 when I was serving, after a few points I looked at the scoreboard and it said 5-2. I said, 'Okay, it's real.' Then I just played every ball. I didn't think about the score at all."

For her part, Williams was philosophical. She was plainly saddened during her press conference, but she gave Halep full marks and recognized that her opponent had been far too good on the day.

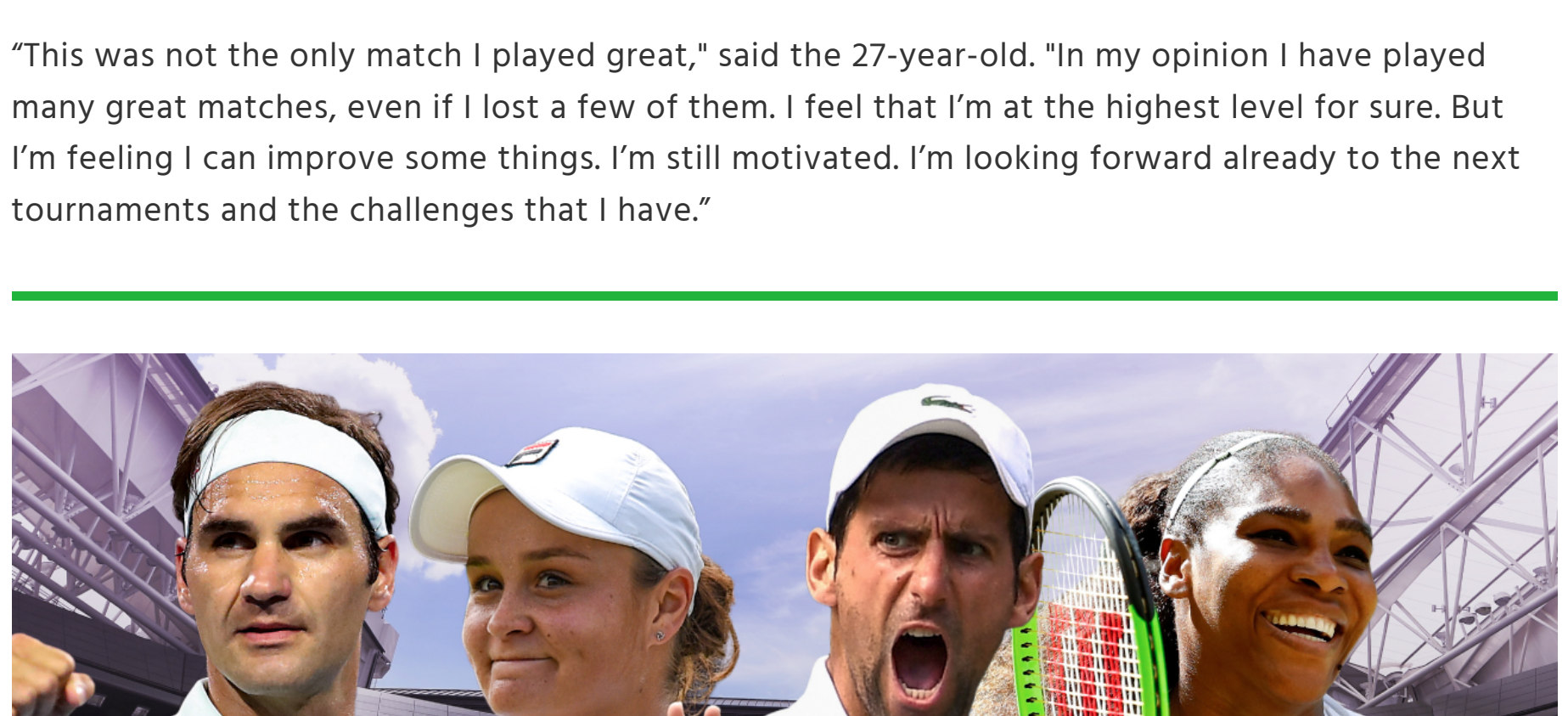
"She just played great," said Williams. "I was just trying different things but today nothing helped. But I also made way too many errors for a lot of stuff to work. She was getting so many balls back. I do have a strategy for players who do get a lot of balls back, which I thought about far too late. I think I was over-hitting it, trying to go for too much. But she was getting just a tremendous amount of balls back.

"Like I said on the court, when someone plays lights out, there's really not much you can do. You just have to understand that it was their day today. Hopefully they can play like that more often, more consistently."

Centre Court – South West Hall

Now Halep has set herself up for a potentially productive period after capturing a second career major. Having finished two years in a row at No. 1 in the world, she seems assured of landing some day as an inductee at the International Tennis Hall of Fame. But there is no reason why she should rest on her laurels now. Halep has the capacity to win a few more majors over the next couple of years. It is entirely possible that the best tennis of her career is ahead of her.

"This was not the only match I played great," said the 27-year-old. "In my opinion I have played many great matches, even if I lost a few of them. I feel that I'm at the highest level for sure. But I'm feeling I can improve some things. I'm still motivated. I'm looking forward already to the next tournaments and the challenges that I have."



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